

ORNITHOLOGICAL LITERATURE

BIRDS OF MEXICO. A GUIDE FOR FIELD IDENTIFICATION. By Emmet Reid Blake. University of Chicago Press, 1953: 5 × 7¾ in., xxx + 644 pp., 331 drawings, one in color, by Douglas Tibbitts. \$6.00.

"Birds of Mexico," the first single volume describing all of the birds of that country and its surrounding islands and waters, is a milestone of ornithological achievement. Although written in English its simple, abbreviated style will make it serviceable to those with a minimum knowledge of the language.

The introduction describes briefly topography and climate of Mexico, and explains the scope of the work, method of treatment, nomenclature, explanations of seasonal status and descriptions, remarks on distribution, subspecies and supplemental information given in the text. Facing page one is a clearly labeled diagram of a bird.

The remainder of the book treats, in nontechnical terms, the 967 full species recorded from the Mexican mainland, including Baja California, the adjacent waters and associated islands. Eighty-nine families of birds are represented. No keys to families are included. Each family section is headed by the scientific and common name of the family. There follow dichotomous keys leading to a "common name" of the species and the page number on which it is described. For families represented by many species the keys are preceded by a division into categories. Species discussion is headed by a "common name" in boldface, the generic and specific names in italics and a numeral indicating the approximate length of the bird in inches. There follow brief descriptions of the adult male, female and immature plumages if markedly different, and occasionally treatment of winter plumage. Distribution is given in general terms by regions, most often by states, and sometimes with a reference to habitat but more often in relatively meaningless terms of "altitude." Subspecies are treated and their distributions given by states and parts of states. Under "Remarks" appear comparisons with similar species, notes on general appearance, habits of some species, and all too rarely descriptions of voice. Notes on calls and song are usually vague and inadequate. Scientific nomenclature mainly follows the major standard published works and various authoritative revisions of more recent date. A comprehensive index to "common" and scientific names appears at the end of the book. The book is well bound, on good paper; print is clear and contains a minimum of mechanical errors.

The great number of illustrations portray in variety common as well as rare Mexican species, many of the latter appearing in Mexico in restricted areas for only part of the year. The illustrations range from rather ornate attempts to simple sketches from heads and foreparts of museum skins. Some show a certain ability at craftsmanship but most demonstrate a lack of familiarity with the living bird in the field. It is my opinion that illustrations of some of the common, easily identified species should have been sacrificed for others more difficult to identify by written description, or more distinctly Mexican. Space devoted to illustrating such cosmopolitan birds as *Anas crecca*, *Crocethia alba* and *Tyto alba* might well have been devoted to some of the Mexican flycatchers and warblers (*Geothlypis*, *Basileuterus*).

It is perhaps superfluous to comment on the disagreement sure to arise from certain interpretations of scientific nomenclature, species and racial relationships, and distributions included in the book; but in a country encompassing so vast an area of rich and diverse topography, climate, flora, and fauna, even the most familiar groups are still imperfectly known. Nevertheless, all ornithologists—amateur and professional—should find this an indispensable guide to the study of birds in Mexico.

Use of the book in the field during more than nine months in 21 Mexican states has shown an unfortunate number of errors, omissions and misleading or confusing statements. The Red-eyed Vireo is not the only gray-capped, green-backed vireo (p. 453); only one of the three races of *Tangavius aeneus* has a "wholly black" female (p. 508); and the Mexican breeding races of Cliff Swallow do not have "a pale forehead" (pp. 369-370).

Most notable omissions are in the keys and in aids to field identification. As stated on page xxiv the book's "primary objective is the sight identification of birds in their natural habitat." There are, however, few adequately described calls or songs, few explicit references to mannerisms, fewer pattern sketches or head pattern descriptions, and except in a few instances only vague, if any, reference to habitat. The keys, perhaps partly due to these omissions, are difficult to use—even with a bird in the hand one is not always successful. Since the book fails to include a key to families or major groups, users must recognize first nearly all of the 89 families occurring in Mexico. A key to families should have been included. The keys to the ducks and hummingbirds are incomplete; other keys are misleading. For example some White-tailed and Red-tailed Hawks cannot be keyed out; only two of the dark phases of the many buteos appear in the key; and numerous female and immature hummingbirds are not included in the keys. Only in reference to the hawks and flycatchers is the bird student warned that all species cannot be identified in the field; this might be extended to include petrels, gulls, hummingbirds, sparrows, buntings and others. Under the species description usually only one race is described; and that race is not often identified. Among the more imaginative descriptions are those of the females of *Thalurania furcata ridgwayi* and *Lophornis delattrei brachylopha*, the former known but from a single male, the latter from two males.

Distributions are given in too general terms, i.e. "wintering to the southward," "southward at high altitudes," "virtually country-wide," and "in suitable habitat." Few species are really country-wide in Mexico. Numerous remarks are wasted words as far as field identification is concerned. For example the description of the nest and eggs of *Tinamus major*, although of interest, helps little to identify the species. A few geographical terms are used incorrectly or loosely. For example "Caribbean slope from Coahuila and Tamaulipas southward" (p. 369) might better have been stated as the slope of the Gulf of Mexico. Reference to the Gulf of Mexico, presumably, as "the Gulf" (p. 468) fails to take into account the other gulfs in Mexican waters.

Usefulness of the book would have been considerably increased by inclusion of more Spanish or Indian names for species, at least those widely used for groups and for well known species.

Common English names for species seem to have been chosen without regard to well-established names long in use. Common names are "handles" for convenience—nothing more. What possible advantage has been gained or assistance extended to the bird watcher in Mexico by substituting "Great Kiskadee" for Derby Flycatcher, "White Tern" for Fairy Tern, "Gray-breasted Woodpecker" for Gila Woodpecker, "Bar-vented Wren" for Sinaloa Wren, "White-tipped Dove" for White-fronted Dove? There are dozens of other seemingly unnecessary changes. Other common names have been chosen as "more suitable for the species complex," a move useful perhaps to the scientist (who is likely to refer only to the scientific name anyway) but one of little help to the bird watcher who wants in a field guide a short name. The names "Scaly-throated Foliage-gleaner" and "Tawny-throated Leaf-scraper" are nearly as long as the birds. There are also complete omissions of well standardized common names; only by the scientific names can one

recognize such birds as the Pacific Loon, Mexican Grebe, Audubon's Caracara, Louisiana Heron, Eastern Bluebird and Arkansas Goldfinch.

In spite of the shortcomings mentioned, "Birds of Mexico," while not completely satisfactory as a field guide, represents a major ornithological achievement and is an indispensable book to anyone interested in the avifauna of Mexico.—DWAINE W. WARNER.

PROCEEDINGS OF THE THIRTY-FIFTH ANNUAL MEETING

BY PHILLIPS B. STREET, SECRETARY

The Thirty-fifth Annual Meeting of the Wilson Ornithological Club was held at Cape May, New Jersey, from Friday, June 11, to Monday, June 14, 1954. It was sponsored by the Delaware Valley Ornithological Club, the New Jersey Audubon Society, and the Urner Ornithological Club.

There were four sessions devoted to papers, two evening motion pictures, "Beacons Along the Flyway," by Frank W. McLaughlin and "Machias Seal Island," by John M. Jubon, and two business meetings. A meeting of the Executive Council was held on Friday evening, June 11. The Annual Dinner was held at the Colonial Hotel on Saturday, June 12, President Walter J. Breckenridge delivering the traditional address. Following motion pictures, the host societies entertained at an informal reception.

Early morning field trips to nearby points of interest were held on Saturday and Sunday mornings. On Sunday evening, a picnic supper was held at the Stone Harbor heronry. On Monday, departure day, some eighty members took a boat trip north from Cape May through the inland waterways to Stone Harbor and return. Another group journeyed north to the Tuckerton Meadows and Beach Haven Inlet, while a third group made an extended field trip which covered the Fortescue area, on Delaware Bay, Bass River State Forest, a portion of the pine barrens, the Tuckerton Meadows, and Beach Haven Inlet.

FIRST BUSINESS SESSION

President Breckenridge called to order the meeting at 10:00 a.m., Saturday, June 12. Hon. Samuel Eldridge, Mayor of Cape May, welcomed the Club, and President Breckenridge responded. The minutes of the 34th Annual Meeting were approved as published in *The Wilson Bulletin* for September, 1953.

Secretary's Report

The secretary, Phillips B. Street, summarized the principal actions of the previous evening's Executive Council meeting as follows:

1. Council accepted the invitation of Oklahoma Agricultural and Mechanical College and the Oklahoma Ornithological Society to hold the 36th Annual Meeting at Stillwater, Oklahoma, from Thursday evening, April 7, to Sunday, April 10, 1955.
2. The resignation of Harrison B. Tordoff as editor of *The Wilson Bulletin*, effective at the completion of the present volume, was reluctantly accepted.

Treasurer's Report

The treasurer, Leonard C. Brecher reported on the finances of the club. The report, already approved by an auditing committee consisting of Burt L. Monroe, chairman, Mrs. Frederick W. Stamm and Harvey B. Lovell, follows: